

What is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)?

Agriculture and Natural Resources Fact Sheet #517

Definition and Description

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a direct marketing alternative for small-scale growers. This system is based on an arrangement between a farmer and a group of consumers. Each consumer (usually considered a member or subscriber) pays up front for a share of the farm's crop, while the grower agrees to provide a weekly bag or box of fresh, in-season produce for the entire growing season, usually 18 to 22 weeks.

CSAs vary greatly in size, share price, and products from farm to farm. According to ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer For Rural Areas) most CSAs have 35 to 200 members and the average farm is 35 acres. However, many CSAs can operate successfully on 1 to 2 acres. Locally, shares might cost anywhere from \$300 to \$600 dollars, depending on the size of the share and what's included. A typical weekly basket intended to feed 2-4 people weighs up to 10 or 12 pounds, and may include vegetables, herbs, fruit, flowers, or eggs. Some growers even offer shares of pork, poultry or beef. According to one study, CSA subscribers can save an average of 37% off supermarket prices (Dyck, Bruno. 1992. Inside the food system: How do community supported farms work? Marketing Digest. August.).

Consumer Benefits

The benefits to both members and growers are substantial. Members receive a regular, weekly supply of fresh, local, often organic in-season produce and know they are directly supporting their local farmer. Often, CSA farms invite subscribers to visit the farm or participate by helping with some of the farm work, from weeding and hoeing to washing and bagging the produce. Many people, especially families who want their children to learn where their food comes from, value this opportunity to reconnect with the source of their food.

Farmer Benefits

CSA farmers tend to get better prices for their products because no middleman is involved. In addition, a pre-established customer base and payment up front allows the farmer to plan his or her season with a greater degree of certainty. CSA members recognize that farming is a risky business, and agree to bear some of the burden should a crop fail in any



given season. On the other hand, if there is an abundance of a given crop, members also share in the bounty.

No One Formula

CSAs can be operated in a variety of formats. On the West Coast it is more likely that a farmer will decide to organize a CSA and solicit members. Whereas, on the East Coast it is often a community group such as a church, civic group, or school group that decides to form a CSA. They will then hire a farmer to grow their food for them.

Another type of CSA arrangement is a cooperative approach. An example of this is the Market Basket CSA initiated by the [Pike Place Market](#). In 1998 Market Basket pooled crops from 13 different farmers for delivery to 136 subscribers in downtown Seattle office buildings. Market Basket's farmers are from all over the growing region, so the "baskets" are a nice mix of heat-loving vegetables and fruits from the east side of the Cascades as well as fresh produce and berries from farmers on the west side of the mountains.

CSAs have also been formed as a way to provide work opportunities for disadvantaged community members. The [Cultivating Communities](#) project in Seattle provides work for immigrants through their CSA project. Local churches support this CSA by encouraging their members to purchase shares. On the other side of the country in Clarksburg, Maryland, the Red Wiggler Foundation employs developmentally disabled adults as growers for their CSA.

The Future of CSA Farming

Across the country Community Supported Agriculture is growing steadily in popularity. Originating in Japan and Europe in the 1970s, the concept migrated to the East Coast of the United States in the mid 1980s. Today it is estimated that there are over 1000 CSA farms across the US serving 100,000 households (ATTRA). Over 30 CSA farms currently serve western Washington and the large population base of the Puget Sound region offers promise of supporting many more.

Some feel that the strong growth of this innovative concept is a reflection of a need to reconnect with the sources of our food. Many people realize that small local farms are struggling to stay in business, and welcome this opportunity to

support them in a meaningful way. At the same time, CSA members and their families receive a valuable education about the challenges that farmers face every day.

A Few Tips for Farmers

Getting Started

- Do some market research first to decide if CSA is right for you. Other direct marketing options like selling to restaurants, specializing in herbs, or developing value-added enterprises may be more appropriate.
- Develop a business plan. Assess your resources, your earning potential, the number of hours required, and the cost.

Outreach

- Create a prospectus or brochure to attract potential members.
- Develop a newsletter. A newsletter is an essential element of any CSA. Newsletters inform members about what they are receiving in their shares each week and what is happening on the farm. They can also suggest recipes for items that may be unfamiliar to members.
- Consider using email or the internet to keep in touch with members. Some farms rely on the web to serve as their newsletter. Keep in mind, however, that some shareholders may not have access to a computer.
- Conduct surveys. Surveys are an important source of feedback for CSA farmers. Some CSAs survey their members as much as three times a year to assess likes and dislikes about the content and quantity of distributions.

Distribution methods

Determining the best distribution system for a CSA is a matter of trial and error.

- Decide if members will pick up their shares on the farm or at predetermined sites (e.g., home sites, office sites, etc.), or if delivery will be an option.
- Consider whether produce will be bagged (or boxed) on farm or if a "market style" system (where members choose from bins of different produce) will be used. Some CSAs even include an element of u-pick for members.

Land

Acquisition of land is essential to the success of CSA farming. Renting or leasing land on an yearly basis may hamper motivations for making long-term improvements and investments to the land. A long-term lease or permanent land trust can help insure a stronger commitment to the community and to the land.

- For more information on options for land acquisition, contact:

American Farmland Trust

1200 18th Street N.W., Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036 Phone: 202-331-7300 , Fax: 202-659-8339

Email: info@farmland.org; Web: <http://www.farmland.org/> or

the King County Farmland Preservation Program
(206) 296-1470; Email: judy.herring@metrokc.gov

Resources

Many resources are available for farmers or consumer groups interested in learning more about how to start a CSA. Here are just a few to start with.

ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas)
P.O. Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702; Phone: 800-346-9140; Web: <http://www.attra.org/>

Their publication on Community Supported Agriculture provides an excellent overview of the CSA system and includes an extensive list of resources.

CSA-L@prairienet.org is an email listserv for networking on Community Supported Agriculture. To subscribe, visit the web page for CSA-L at <http://www.prairienet.org/pcsa/csa-l.html>, or send a message to "listproc@prairienet.org" with "subscribe CSA-L Firstname Lastname" in the message. Put your first and last names in place of Firstname and Lastname and omit the quotes. You may leave the subject line blank.

Books

Gregson, Bob and Bonnie. 1996. *Rebirth of the Small Family Farm*. IMF Assoc., Vashon Island, WA.
Available for \$9.95; make checks payable to IMF Associates, PO Box 2542, Vashon Island, WA 98070.

Groh, Trauger and Steven McFadden. 1997. *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited: Community Supported Farms—Farm Supported Communities*. Farming and Gardening Association. Kimberton, PA.

Includes an appendix with suggestions for getting started.

University of California Cooperative Extension, Placer County and UC Small Farm Center. 1995. *Community Supported Agriculture...Making the Connection*. 198 pages, binder format.

According to ATTRA this is "The best single manual you can buy." Available for \$25 plus \$5 shipping/handling from: UCCE, 11477 E Ave., Auburn, CA 95603; Phone: 916-889-7385. Make checks payable to UC Regents.

**Alternate formats available upon request.
206-205-3100 (TTY 711)**

Want to join a CSA?

If you are interested in finding a CSA near you, call [Seattle Tilth](tel:206-633-0451) at 206-633-0451 to request their Community Supported Agriculture Farm Directory, ask at your local [Farmers' Market](#), or visit the [King County Farms](http://www.metrokc.gov/farms/) web site at <http://www.metrokc.gov/farms/>

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